

Christ Reformation Church

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Wise as Serpents – A Practical Theology of Evil

**(Part 23 – Take the Lord’s
Warnings About Evil Seriously)**

June 5, 2016

Sermon Text: Luke 22:31-34

Scripture Reading: Luke 22:39-62

And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you." But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man." (Mat 16:22-23)

"Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers." Peter said to him, "Lord, I am ready to go with you

both to prison and to death." Jesus said, "I tell you, Peter, the rooster will not crow this day, until you deny three times that you know me." (Luk 22:31-34)

But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property, and with his wife's knowledge he kept back for himself some of the proceeds and brought only a part of it and laid it at the apostles' feet. But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back for yourself part of the proceeds of the land? (Act 5:1-3)

As you can see from just these verses, Peter had numerous encounters with Satan, but like most of us he was a slow learner. In the first text, our Lord reveals that Peter was being used by Satan to hinder the Father's purpose of redemption in Christ.

In the book of Acts, we see Peter recognizing that it was Satan who had led Ananias to lie to the Holy Spirit, working to infect the early church with hypocrisy.

And of course probably the most well-known encounter of Peter with Satan is seen in Peter's three denials of Christ. Consider this carefully. Here is Peter in the immediate presence of the Lord Jesus, the One who Peter had confessed to be the Messiah –

And he began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again. And he said this plainly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and seeing his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man." (Mar 8:31-33)

Peter was pointedly rebuked by Christ for yielding to Satan's work in opposing God's plan for His Son to go to the cross. But again, Peter is specifically told by Christ that he had better be on high alert because Satan had his sights on him. He didn't listen. He didn't pray. And before the rooster crowed that morning, we all know what the outcome was.

Peter did not listen to Christ's warnings about impending evil worked by the enemy. He didn't listen. He

demonstrated overconfidence in himself, claiming he could handle anything that came his way, and he failed miserably. The only reason he repented afterward is that the Lord had prayed for him ahead of time.

As I considered these verses and events, I found it amazing that Peter did not take Christ's warnings seriously. And it would take some very hard, humbling lessons before Peter really "got it". We know that he did because later on he wrote this to US –

Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world. (1Pe 5:8-9)

Be serious, not careless. Be watchful – be on guard scanning the horizon. The adversary, the one who is *against* you IS on the prowl. Not maybe. He IS on the prowl and his purpose is to consume you. To destroy your faith.

I would suggest to you this morning that –

- Most churches and professing Christians are not serious about all this, are not watchful, and

- They do not *want to be*

Christians of all people should WANT to learn about evil, about the enemy, about his agents and tactics and disguises. That is what soldiers do. They train for battle, not for peace. Whoever heard of a soldier going to boot camp and being trained for peace? Yet somehow that seems to be what happens typically in the church. Yes, we are to desire peace, work for peace, do all that is possible to be at peace with one another, BUT...

We have an enemy who never, ever wants peace. He only desires war. He lusts to destroy all of God's creation and be god himself. So it is with his children. You cannot have peace with a person who only wants war. The only proper response to such a person is to put on your armor, pick up your weapons, and do battle.

Let's listen again to Peter's hard-learned wisdom –

Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world. (1Pe 5:8-9)

And Paul tells us really the same thing

–

Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm. (Eph 6:11-13)

Now, I do not know all the ways in which the devil communicates with us, or tempts us, or as Jesus put it with Peter – sifts us. But I do know what is probably his most common means of coming against us –

Through his emissaries, his children, who parade as sheep and creep in among us to do the evil will of their father.

And the fundamental methods of these wicked ones who come to us looking and sounding like “sons of righteousness” (as Paul puts it to the Corinthians) is *lying* and *destroying*. (See John 8 on this). The entire goal is always to tear down Christ's kingdom and build up the kingdom of darkness

because the god of this world wants to be *God*.

So Scripture, as we have seen, strongly and repeatedly instructs us, even commands us, to be serious. Don't clown around on guard duty. Don't sleep as Peter did. Don't be caught without your armor on. And most importantly, *acknowledge that you are in a battle and the enemy has his agents all around us*. Don't, therefore, be surprised when one of them is discovered and it turns out he or she has been parading as an eminent saint for years.

I will say it again. Most professing Christians today do not take the Lord's warnings about evil seriously. In fact, these kinds of warnings in Scripture are really quite foreign to their thinking and they easily just blow them off. Listen to Peter once more and think as you listen just how these words of sober warning and truth are received by the average church member today – 2Pe 2:1-22

But false prophets also arose among the people, **just as there will be false teachers among you**, who will **secretly** bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction.

And many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of truth will be blasphemed. And in their greed they will exploit you with false words. Their condemnation from long ago is not idle, and their destruction is not asleep.

For if God did not spare **angels** when they sinned, but cast them into hell and committed them to chains of gloomy darkness to be kept until the judgment; if he did not spare the ancient world, but preserved Noah, a herald of righteousness, with seven others, when he brought a flood upon the world of the ungodly; if by turning the cities of **Sodom and Gomorrah** to ashes he condemned them to extinction, making them an example of what is going to happen to the ungodly; and if he rescued righteous Lot, greatly distressed by the sensual conduct of the wicked (for as that righteous man lived among them day after day, he was tormenting his righteous soul over their lawless deeds that he saw and heard); then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trials, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment until the day of judgment, and especially those who indulge in the lust of defiling passion and despise authority.

Bold and willful, they do not tremble as they blaspheme the glorious ones,

whereas angels, though greater in might and power, do not pronounce a blasphemous judgment against them before the Lord. But these, like irrational animals, creatures of instinct, born to be caught and destroyed, blaspheming about matters of which they are ignorant, will also be destroyed in their destruction, suffering wrong as the wage for their wrongdoing.

They count it pleasure to revel in the daytime. They are blots and blemishes, reveling in their deceptions, while they feast with you. They have eyes full of adultery, insatiable for sin. They entice unsteady souls. They have hearts trained in greed. **Accursed children!** Forsaking the right way, they have gone astray.

They have followed the way of Balaam, the son of Beor, who loved gain from wrongdoing, but was rebuked for his own transgression; a speechless donkey spoke with human voice and restrained the prophet's madness. These are waterless springs and mists driven by a storm. For them the gloom of utter darkness has been reserved.

For, speaking loud boasts of folly, they entice by sensual passions of the flesh those who are barely escaping from those who live in error. **They promise**

them freedom, but they themselves are slaves of corruption. For whatever overcomes a person, to that he is enslaved. For if, after they have escaped the defilements of the world through the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first. For it would have been better for them never to have known the way of righteousness than after knowing it to turn back from the holy commandment delivered to them. What the true proverb says has happened to them: "The dog returns to its own vomit, and the sow, after washing herself, returns to wallow in the mire." (2Pe 2:1-22)

Peter's opening statement is powerful for us.... "false prophets also arose among the people, **just as there will be false teachers among you.**" All the things he speaks of which are recorded for us in Scripture, *continue to happen all through the days of the church age and that includes now, our day, our time.* Evil. Especially evil as it hides behind a "Christian" disguise and comes among us to work its wickedness. **THIS** is why you have these severe warnings from the Lord –

But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of

sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one. For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? God judges those outside. "Purge the evil person from among you." (1Co 5:11-13)

Most Christians blow off these kinds of Scriptures. What do you suppose the Lord thinks of being “blown off” when He issues his commands?

Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it. For since the message declared by angels proved to be reliable, and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution, **how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation?** It was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard, (Heb 2:1-3)

Answer? We will not escape! We must not carelessly neglect hearing, believing, and obeying whenever the Lord speaks. But there is widespread resistance to the Lord’s words today, much like the Apostle experienced. Listen very carefully to these important words –

About this we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food, for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil. (Heb 5:11-14)

See it? What is the mark of a strong Christian growing in the wisdom and knowledge of the Lord according to these verses? *DISTINGUISHING GOOD FROM EVIL!* Do you see that? We really are not making too much of evil in this series of studies. The Christian who is mature in Christ, who can digest the solid food of God’s deeper truths and wisdom, who has moved beyond the milk stage where only ABC’s and kindergarten basics are understood, THAT Christian is marked by having “power of discernment.” Discernment of what? Good and evil!

This is HUGE! People think and assume that telling good from evil is easy and basic. Not so! It takes “constant practice” in diligently seeking God’s wisdom, hearing His

Word very carefully, listening to Christians who are truly wise in order to recognize righteousness from unrighteousness. It takes *skill in handling the word of righteousness. Training. Constant practice!* But so many people today who claim the name of Christ are careless. They are dull of hearing. You can't even teach them because it is soooo hard to explain God's wisdom to them, specifically wisdom about evil vs good. Do you see how profound this is? And there is great danger here! Why?

Because those who have tasted....well, listen to it –

Therefore let us leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, and of instruction about washings, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. (Heb 6:1-2)

Let us LEAVE the ABC's. Yes, these are wonderful truths. The doctrine of Christ, His deity, his entering into this world, the gospel call us to repent and turn to Christ in faith, baptism, the resurrection to come and eternal judgment to come – wonderful, foundational truths. BUT the Apostle

says these are the ABC's of Christ and we must not remain in kindergarten.

I suggest to you that this is precisely where most Christians are today and they are encouraged to stay in this babyhood by their teachers. Those teachers and churches ought to be admonishing them in practical wisdom, in applying Christ in their lives and specifically giving them admonishment to press on. Listen again –

But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil.

Let me ask you this. What do most Christians think that Christian maturity is? What is their concept of a strong, mature saint of God? I can tell you. Someone who is a great theologian, who can cite and recite this doctrine and that doctrine and write papers and books on theology. These are the kind of people we put in as teachers in our seminaries. They are the kind we fill out pulpits with.

But do you see here that this is NOT how the Apostle is defining Christian maturity? What is his definition? Listen again – “those who have their powers of discernment trained by

***constant practice to distinguish
GOOD from EVIL.***

And I recommend to you that this power of discernment is sorely lacking in the church today. Wisdom is lacking. People who can discern what is good and what is evil....WHO is good and WHO is evil!

How do we know? Well, I bring you back to the subject I always bring you back to. Christian churches, Christian counselors, Christian seminaries, individual Christians today...are failing this test of discernment not only miserably, but *regularly and typically*. It is not wisdom, it is not the mark of real maturity in Christ to know Greek and Hebrew and have tons of Bible verses memorized and to be able to argue if God has emotions or not! What maturity in Christ is, the state that the Lord calls us to grow into pronto! is the wisdom of the Lord given by His Spirit through His Word *to discern good from evil*.

No wonder the churches are in such trouble today. No wonder evil abounds among us. No wonder those who truly are growing in the wisdom of the Lord are regularly rejected by the powers that be in typical local, visible churches. And no wonder that the evil ones are embraced there.

Do you want to truly please the Lord? Do you want to press on into the maturity He calls you to? Do you want to work out your salvation and be assured that you will stand before God in the full righteousness of Christ on that Day?

Then become wise as serpents regarding evil, all the while remaining innocent as doves. Get into the fight. Stop holding back. Take the Lord's words seriously on these things.

The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. (Rom 16:20)
